

Chronos Curvature

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Part One

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Chapter 1: 0540-0750 December 27, 2015, 183rd Airlift Squadron

183rd Airlift Squadron, 58N 18' 23", 20W 02' 20"

The military grey, four-engine, jet cargo aircraft were separated by five hundred-foot intervals between airframes. They were flying in two staggered parallel lines at 32,000 feet elevation. The flight of eight C-17 Globemaster III airplanes was flying with their wingtip navigation beacons flashing red and green against the black backdrop of the night sky, which was dotted white with stars. They moved together high across the night sky like a red and green flashing constellation sign traversing the heavens. The C-17's comprised the 183rd Airlift Squadron (183 AS) of the 172nd Air Wing (172 AW) of the Mississippi Air National Guard. Their mission is global troop and equipment air movement. Their C-17's have a cruising speed of 450 knots, a ceiling 45,000 feet, a distance of 2,420 miles, and a crew of five. The pilots were rated for air-land operations as well as troop and equipment parachute delivery operations. They had departed from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia en route to their destination of Haugesund Airport in the city of Karmoy, Norway, which was 3781 miles. Lacking the ability to make it on a single load of fuel in-flight refueling was going to take place for the flight a little more than two-thirds of the way to Norway.

In-flight refueling itself is comparable to playing pin the tail on the donkey when the tail and the donkey are both moving independently of each other. The concept is for both planes to get on the same heading and elevation, and relatively at the same speed, generally at around 280 knots (322 miles per hour). The tanker dispensing the fuel reels out a hose with a basket attached to the end about the diameter of a basketball called a drogue. The plane needing the fuel extends a refueling probe. Traveling at over three hundred miles an hour, the pilot of the aircraft requiring the fuel tries

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to put the probe into the drogue, which is doing a little dance in the wind. The technique and skill are all centered on the depth perception and hand/eye coordination of the pilot. Once paired together, the two planes must travel in tandem as one while the fuel is transferred. Add two planes refueling at once, and the potential for catastrophe is exceptionally high. Doing it at night is almost impossible for junior pilots.

However difficult the process is, experienced pilots make this process seem mundane, and so it was with the refueling of all eight C-17 of the 183 AS. The in-flight refueling had been routine and completed by four KC-135R Stratotankers assigned to the 155 Air Refueling Wing out of the Nebraska Air National Guard about half an hour ago. All eight C-17 from the 183 AS had enough fuel to make it to Haugesund Airport in Karmoy, Norway. Leading the squadron was the Commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Edward Karstens. He was a Master Aviator with over 4,000 hours logged in the Air Force alone. He had been the Squadron Commander for a little over three years, a year longer than most command tours. His time would be over within the next twelve months, and his next assignment would most likely be on the staff of the 172nd Air Wing. This would be his last Annual Training (AT) as a Squadron Commander.

Sitting in the cockpit of the lead aircraft tail number 3387, Lieutenant Colonel Karstens glanced at the Formation Flying System (FFS) display and saw that all his aircraft were in a textbook perfect staggered trail formation. The FFS was a relatively new system replacing the problematic Station Keeping Equipment (SKE) system. This allowed him to fly from the lead and ensure that all his aircraft were in formation and accounted for. It was a calm night with unlimited visibility, so far. He glanced at his weather radar and was not happy the way it was showing an impending storm developing directly in the path of his squadron, almost eighty miles ahead of them.

The AN/APS-150 weather radar is a very accurate instrument. In fifteen years of flying, Lieutenant Colonel Karstens had never seen a storm form out of nowhere as quickly as this one, not once. That

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includes his time at his full-time job as a Delta Airlines pilot for the last six years. While he was assigned to the Air National Guard unit in Mississippi, he was based out of Kennedy International Airport in New York, and he routinely flew the London or Paris route. As he looked at the storm cell shaping up, he thought to himself that meteorology should have picked the storm cell building up back at Langley AFB. There is no way they should have missed it for his mission planning brief. A storm this size should have been noticed well in advance to change the air corridor route he had chosen for his route to Norway. They were well past the midway point, and there wasn't any place to divert outside the storm cell range and still make it to their destination on time. As it was now, they could only ride it out, and it was most likely going to get terribly bumpy for those in the back.

This specific mission had been in planning for over three years. The State Partnership Program (SPP) was a unique State Department and National Guard program that was based upon a state's formal relationship with a foreign country. While not designed to teach or conduct combat tactics to foreign countries, the Norwegian Home Guard (Heimeverne) was a reserve force, so they requested US Citizen Soldiers affiliated with SOF be used as the aggressors for their homeland defense requirement. Norway was a recent addition in 2012, where they partnered with North Carolina. North Carolina had two other partnerships with the countries of Botswana and Moldova. For Norway's fourth SPP joint mission, they had explicitly requested Army National Guard Special Forces to see how the Heimeverne could respond to a natural disaster and an armed excursion, not specifically in that order.

The US had rules and regulations that required all requests for combat troops being used in combat training or operations to go through the joint theater command for validation of mission. In this case, the request would have gone to US European Command (EUCOM) in Stuttgart, Germany. They would then determine if the request was a valid mission within the EUCOM area of operations (AO). Upon validation, they would then identify if it was a conventional mission or a Special Forces Mission. A Special Forces mission would then be sent to the Special Operations Command Europe

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(SOCEUR) element specifically. SOCEUR would then validate whether it was a valid Special Forces Mission within their AO. Upon validation, they would then send the request to the US Army Special Forces Command (USASFC) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. USASFC would then become the force provider and determine whether it would be an Active Duty Unit or a National Guard unit. Since this was under the SPP, they would merely rubber-stamp approval and send it to the National Guard Bureau. While they really wanted to send active-duty troops, they could not fill SPP requests with anything but National Guard troops. Typically, however, USASFC had enough active duty and National Guard Special Forces available to fill about 35% of all mission requests globally.

For this reason, the Norwegian Home Guard Commander asked to attend the 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (20th SFG(A)) Training Management Seminar (GTMS), which is held once a year. Norway approached the Group Commander with the Concept. By using the SPP, Norway would have B Company, 3rd Special Forces Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) out of North Carolina (they had the partnership with Norway) provide simulated insurgency operations and later simulated assistance from natural disasters. The 20th Group Commander agreed it would be good for both Norway and the 20th Group.

The Norwegian Ambassador to the United States in Washington DC, Director Kåre Aas, then went directly to The Adjutant General (TAG) of North Carolina for his approval after the GTMS. Once he received the tentative approval from the TAG, he went to the Secretary of State at the US State Department to request the use of the Army National Guard to test their homeland defense reserve forces, as well as provide subject matter experts at domestic responses. The Secretary had waffled at first due to fiscal constraints. Director Aas assured the Secretary of State that Norway was willing to fund all logistical costs if it was done under the auspice of the SPP. Since it would be no cost to the US, the Secretary of State sent an email to the Director of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs with instructions to make sure this happens.

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Once approved by the Department of State and the US Ambassador to Norway, a mission line number was assigned by the National Guard Bureau (NGB) J5 International Affairs Division (NGB AI). At this point, the Combatant Commander at EUCOM was now only required to be advised of the troops entering his theater, but he couldn't say no, nor could he change the assignment.

While ordinary Army Special Forces (Special Forces) tasking went through Special Forces Command, this was not a Special Forces combat deployment, but an SPP rotation. While it was a clear end-run around the use of Special Forces, Norway had done their homework, and it was wholly authorized by federal statute. The NG AI passed the mission to the ARNG G3 Operations Division (ARNG-OD) who then tasked B Company, 3rd Special Forces Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (3/20 SFG(A)) located in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina to fill the requirement. But as the adage goes, 'be careful what you ask for because you might just get it' this flight was about to get very uncomfortable. But they were Special Forces; they could handle it. Lieutenant Colonel Karstens tightened his harness a little tighter and checked the altitude, heading, and airspeed, one more time.

In the back cargo bay, Major Alan Glore, Company Commander of Bravo Company (B/3/20 SFG(A)), had just fallen asleep when he felt a tap on his shoulder. The crew chief was there and asked him to follow him up to the flight deck. Sitting in the auxiliary seat, he put on a headset. Major Glore could see out the cockpit window in front of him. There was a clear line of demarcation where the bright star-filled night ended with a black veil of darkness. The black veil was being lit up by a fierce lightning storm, and they were heading right for it.

"Sorry to wake you, Major, but you might want to wake your men and have them go over the tie-downs on their gear and vehicles. It is going to get very bumpy," said Lieutenant Colonel Karstens.

"Are we going through that?" asked Major Glore, indicating the impending storm.

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“We should be able to get above some of it, but the anvil of the storm cell is higher than we can fly. It is too big to fly around, and we can’t turn around and still make our drop time. There is going to be some air turbulence and possible strong wind shears and shifts,” responded Lieutenant Colonel Karstens.

“What about the lightning? It looks like it is going in all directions, not just downwards. Is that normal?” asked Major Glore.

“Major, there is nothing about this storm that is normal. Don’t worry about the lightning, but the turbulence will probably be pretty rough though. You might want to make sure everyone has barf bags. You have about ten minutes to get everything and everyone secured,” said Lieutenant Colonel Karstens.

Nine minutes later, at the edge of the storm cell, the GPS went out when the starboard wingtip took a lightning strike as the C-17 approached the edge of the storm cell.

“Shit! We just lost GPS Navigation,” exclaimed Major Stacy Swenson, the Co-Pilot.

“Taking the plane off autopilot,” Lieutenant Colonel Karstens replied, “Well, this is going to be a fun ride. Stacy plot our position on the nav chart and start the timer for dead reckoning. We’ll use INS as primary until GPS is back up. We are headed on a course of 57 degrees magnetic. Turn on the running lights so others will see us. We don’t want them hitting us if we drift off course. Stacy, would you contact the other birds and let them know we have lost GPS?” responded Lieutenant Colonel Karstens.

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“All Hydra elements this is Hydra Lead. Be advised our GPS is out. We are INS only. Acknowledge over,” said Major Swenson over the primary frequency for the flight.

It took over three minutes for Major Swanson to make contact due to the atmospheric disruption of the radios. “Hey Ed, you aren’t going to believe this. GPS is down on every single one of our birds. They’re not showing any damage, but lightning strikes knocked out all the GPS, and the flight is only INS capable right now,” said Major Swenson.

“Well, that’s a first. Ron, get with Major Glore and see if any of their high-speed gear has a GPS that we can use,” said Lieutenant Colonel Karstens in the internal radio to Master Sergeant Ron Montoya, the Crew Chief.

The wind shear hit without warning, causing a sudden change in engine whine as the engines lost thrust power and screamed hungrily for more air. In just seconds, the plane had dropped 300 feet. As if he did it every day, Lieutenant Colonel Karstens added throttle and had Major Swenson add ten degrees of flap. This leveled them off and raised them back 300 feet. Easing off the throttle, the turbines settled back into a satisfactory howl, and Stacy returned the flaps to their previous position.

The turbulence started, but rather than pitching up and down in elevation bumps and dips, it was more of a violent shake that jarred everything and everyone without losing significant altitude. Adding to this were numerous lightning strikes hitting not only wingtips but fuselage as well. This left a static electricity charge in the cargo area that could be felt by the loose hair but didn’t generate any electrical charges from touch when they grabbed on to something to keep from getting tossed around.

After about ten minutes, the turbulence stopped. Major Alan Glore and the Company Sergeant Major, Sergeant Major Tobias Morgan, unbuckled and started checking on the men and the

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equipment tie-downs. The crew chief came up to them and explained the GPS went out and asked if they had any type of GPS that might work for navigation in the cockpit. Sergeant Major Morgan went to the Company Communications Sergeant, Sergeant First Class Kevin Petithory, and asked him to get out some of the Magellan GPS 315's and follow the crew chief. A few minutes later, Sergeant First Class Petithory followed the crew chief up into the cockpit.

Sergeant First Class Petithory had been in Special Forces for fourteen years and a Communications Sergeant for seven. He was a system network intrusion analyst in his civilian job as a defense industry private contractor. A wiz at electronic gadgetry, he noticed something was off after the second Magellan failed to pick up any satellites. "Sir," he said in his headset, "we should have picked up at least one satellite between the aircraft and these GPSs. The third one just failed at picking up any sats as well. I think something is either blocking us from receiving the signal or blocking the sats from sending a signal. Something is wrong with the satellites, not the receiving devices. So until they come back online, the GPS navigation is out. Are we still going to be able to kick out 2085 without GPS?"

The eighty-two members of B/3/20 SFG (A) had been separated by teams, each A-Team flying on their own C-17 for purposes of mission planning. The Company Headquarters element, also known as the B-Team, was on two C-17's. The Annual Training (AT) for this year was far different than usual AT. For one, it was being conducted at the end of the year in December instead of the July/August time frame. Also, it was a three week AT, which wasn't in itself unusual for OCONUS Special Forces AT's, but a Military Unit Training Assembly (MUTA) 5 had been tacked on the front and back ends. A MUTA is 4 hours of training. A MUTA five was two and a half days. This basically meant a month-long AT.

The missions for the A-Teams would be two-fold. The first was a force on force exercise with the Special Forces incorporating clandestine infiltration techniques to conduct an Unconventional

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Warfare (UW) exercise for seven days. During those seven days, they would be establishing an auxiliary support network and then organize Guerrilla Base Camps (G-Base) to operate out of. This is what Special Forces were known for. This would be very similar to what they did during the Robin Sage portion of the Special Forces Qualification Course.

Another difference in this mission was that if at any time they were compromised and captured, they would, in fact, be taken to a real jail and handled as an espionage prisoner, not to a holding area where they just sat, slept, and read. The Norwegians would be allowed up to a point to 'extract' information about the other elements from those they captured. It would be less than waterboarding and torture, but it would be very uncomfortable none-the-less for any team member captured.

The second mission of the AT would be a Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) type exercise. For this part, specific teams would be working with the Home guard on natural disasters while other teams were working on man-made disasters. The Heimeverne would see how Special Forces could be used in a DSCA response mode.

Inside the C-17 tail number 3317, Captain Derek Bennett, the Detachment Commander of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 2085, was reviewing the infiltration plan in his head. ODA 2085 was a combat dive team. Most of the members on the team had been former active duty where they were on dive teams. Captain Bennett himself had been active duty enlisted. He had left active duty in 1999 after his first tour in the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) to finish his college degree in International Studies. He joined the Virginia Army National Guard at the end of 2000 when he met the qualifications for OCS. He was Branch qualified 11A (Infantry Officer) in 2001 as a 2nd Lieutenant and assigned to the 1st Infantry Battalion, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division.

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As a former enlisted Special Forces Soldier, he distinctly stood out academically and professionally from his other thirty-seven classmates. When he was pinned as a 2nd Lieutenant, he was one of five newly commissioned Lieutenants that was Ranger qualified, and the only officer that was Ranger and Special Forces qualified present at the graduation ceremony. Also, he was a Senior Parachutist, Combat Diver, Army Sniper, and Pathfinder qualified. He also had a Combat Infantryman's Badge (CIB) from his time with Recon Platoon, 2nd Infantry Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

In January 2002, the Virginia State Adjutant General (TAG) specifically directed 1st Lieutenant Bennett from the 116th Infantry to B/3/20 SFG (A). B/3/20 SFG (A) was being mobilized as the first Virginia National Guard unit mobilized for combat operations since World War II. Short on Branch qualified 18A's (Special Forces Officer), 1st Lieutenant Bennett was given command of ODA 2085. He returned from Afghanistan with two Bronze Stars (one with 'V' device) and a Purple Heart after picking up some shrapnel from an old Russian hand grenade thrown by an Al Qaeda insurgent. After the deployment, newly promoted Captain Bennett went to the newly redesigned 116th Brigade Combat Team to complete his Company Commander time. After his Company Command time, he went through the 18A (Special Forces Officer) course. He was the only student in his 18A class that had actual 18A combat leader time, to include the 18A Company Commander at the Special Warfare Center.

In 2004 he returned to B/3/20 SFG (A) as the Detachment Commander of 2085 for four years. During that time, he had completed the Dive Supervisor Course as well as the Waterborne Infiltration Course (WIC). In 2008 he was moved to the High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) team 2084, where he attended both HALO and HALO Jumpmaster course. In 2012 he was returned to 2085 and was told by the Virginia Army National Guard Chief of Staff personally that this would be his last team command. He had to move up in ranks or take a reduction to enlisted or Warrant officer if he wanted to stay Special Forces. He would have over 13 years as a Detachment

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Commander. Most active-duty 18A's had two years as a detachment commander, some three, but very few had four, and none thirteen. That could only happen in the Army National Guard.

Since coming back to B/3/20 SFG in 2004, he had also completed two more combat deployments (one to Iraq and one with a sister battalion to Afghanistan). He also added two more Bronze Stars, a Silver Star, and he was the first American to receive the equivalent of the French Croix de Guerre since Vietnam, and the first National Guardsman since World War II to win it. As new members came to the company, he had first dibs on those with their diver qualifications. Eight members of the team had previous active duty dive team time. Three detachment members had been sent to the Special Forces Combat Diver underwater operations course at Key West from B/3/20 SFG (A).

During the months preceding this AT, they had been honing their dry suit diving skills. They would be conducting a waterborne infiltration, mainly because no-one expected anyone to come from the water in December, in Norway. Drysuit diving is a specialty dive rating in the civilian world, allowing diving in water temperatures close to freezing. Drysuit diving uses layers of dry garments to form layers of air as insulation rather than water. This creates challenges with buoyancy so the drysuit itself is used to assist buoyancy in addition to a buoyancy compensation device (BCD). Pockets of air can also create squeezes at depths that can cause pain and loss of circulation in some areas. The detachment had been diving down to 90 feet to master dry suit diving for the last three months.

Rather than conduct an air-land operation like the rest of the company, ODA 2085 was going to infill within a few hours. The plan was for them to parachute in international waters twenty miles off the coast of the Norwegian island of Langøya. The team had prepped three Zodiac rubber raiding crafts for airborne operations. Referred to as a 'Hard Duck', the Zodiacs had been inflated and prepped for an airborne drop. The ducks would be kicked out first, followed by the team. They would then infiltrate to within eight miles from the city of Vinje, where they would enter the water

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and swim to land. For the dive itself, they would be using LAR V Draeger closed circuit diving systems. This was a bubble-less closed system that circulated the air.

For the dive, they would be at a depth of about twelve feet underwater, but they would be 'Finning' for almost three and a half hours. Once on land, they would meet at the Beach Landing Site with an 'Auxiliary' member for the overland infiltration. The team had only set out what gear they would be taking with them for the mission in a dive bag that would be attached to their parachute harness and lowered after their jump. The other gear was stored inside two ISU '90s and three pallets in the forward part of the cargo bay, as were their four vehicles. These would air-land with the rest of the company. However, with the GPS down, the difficulty level of the mission just increased one hundred percent.